

UNIQUE PURPLE SHELL OF THE
PAPER NAUTILUS
(*ARGONAUTA ARGO* LINNAEUS)

BY RICHARD I. JOHNSON

On October 7, 1873, Dr. Augustine Shurtleff wrote the Museum of Comparative Zoology, offering for sale the collection of shells made by his late father, Dr. Samuel A. Shurtleff, who, before his death, was an active member of the Boston Society of Natural History.

"My late father left a very large and complete cabinet of shells. In the year 1840 it was one of the most extensive collections in New England."

J. G. Anthony, then in charge of conchology, but in ill health, turned the correspondence over to his young assistant, Charles E. Hamlin, who wrote on November 15:

"Mr. Anthony's long experience makes his opinion of the money value of your collection worth knowing, while mine is not. He has said to me, and would probably not object to my repeating to you, that he regards from \$800 to \$1000 as a fair valuation of your shells. They doubtless cost your Father more, but as you are aware all such collections are disposed of at a cruel sacrifice, if put to sale. The dispersion of private cabinets and libraries after the death of their gatherers is one of the saddest things in the world."

In a further letter, December 9, 1873, Hamlin wrote: "With regard to the purple Paper Nautilus, Messrs. Anthony, Jenks and myself conversed about it last week. Mr. A., who is familiar with all the tricks of dealers, pronounced the color to be artificial — the result of some dying process adopted to make it a rare specimen. As he is a very *positive* man he will probably adhere to his notion. But from your account of the shell it seems to me its color is probably genuine. The species is doubtless *Argonauta argo*, ordinarily white, as you are aware, but in this case colored by reason of some unusual conditions of its life or habitat."

The collection was not purchased. Anthony died in 1877 and Hamlin, who was more interested in paleontology, did not pursue its acquisition.

In 1922, William F. Clapp, then Curator of Mollusks, was requested by Francis Shurtleff to remove a shell collection from his home in Cambridgeport. To help him pack the collection Clapp enlisted the aid of a young enthusiast, William J. Clench, who recalls that they were told that the purple Paper Nautilus had cost \$1000.00 and that the collection had not been made by the donor. (While S. Shurtleff probably paid a high price for the shell, after two generations of non conchologists, Anthony's maximum value of the collection must have remained in their minds as the price of the single specimen.) It contained little else of scientific interest save a paratype of *Unio shurtleffianus* Lea (MCZ 175566). Clapp, unaware of the provenance of the collection, merely accessioned it as the Shurtleff collection. Upon examining the Nautilus (MCZ 293002), now more pink than purple, Clench noticed that it was covered with a number of very small pink barnacles. Without knowing it, he had confirmed what old Anthony had known, though almost blind when he had declared it: the purple Paper Nautilus is a fake.

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